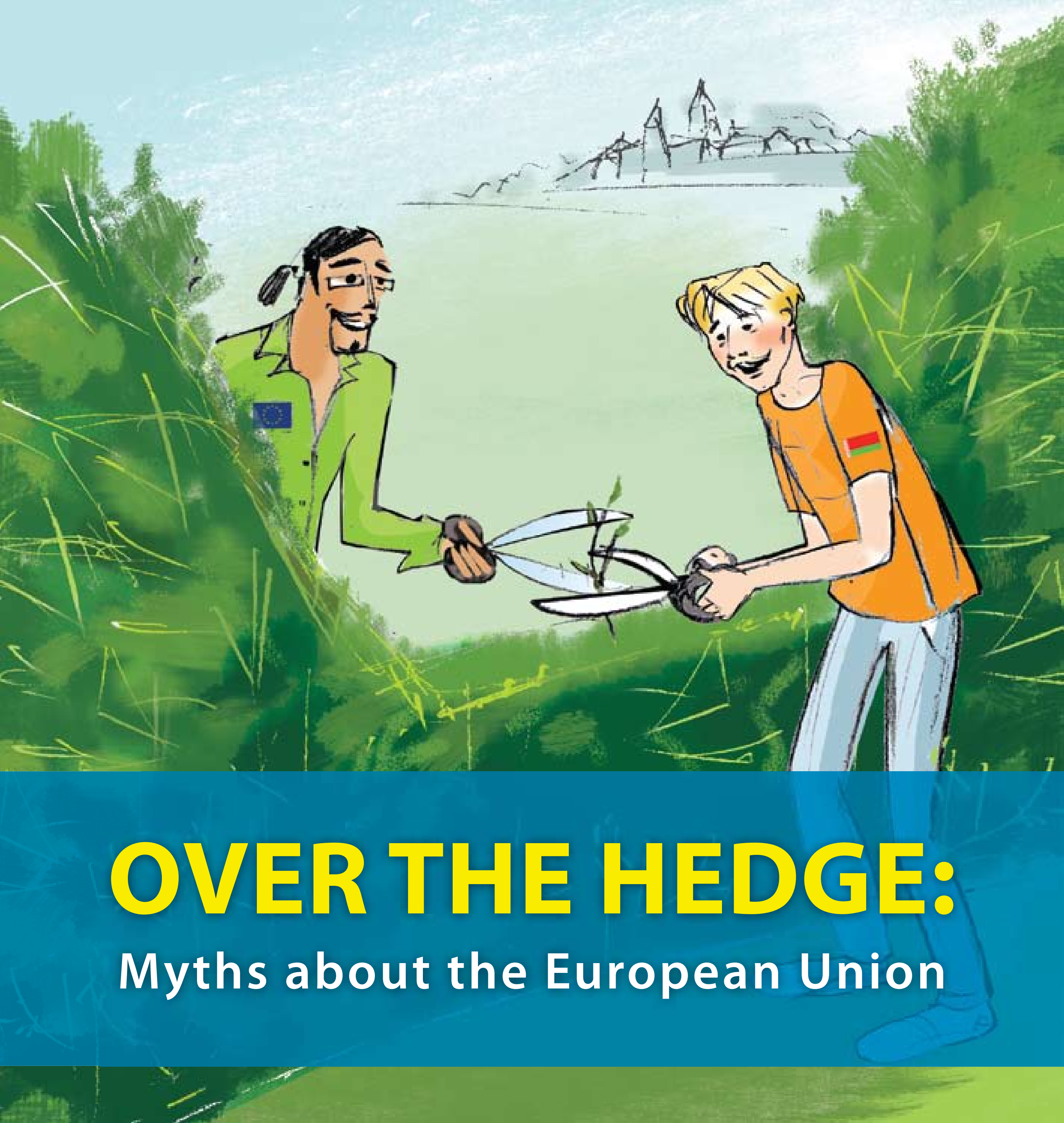


OVER THE HEDGE:

Myths about the European Union

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Nordic Conical of Ministers

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Eastern Europe Studies Centre

MYTHS ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

One's judgement about the world is based on his or her own personal knowledge, ideas and values – and on his or her personal "myths" about the things happening around. When these ideas about life become common, they turn into myths that live in the mind of the whole society, i.e. in mass consciousness.

Popular consciousness is always mythologised. That becomes dangerous if myths do not appear and die naturally, but are created and deliberately thrust upon the society in order to serve someone's interests. A group of people or the society as a whole trusts the ideas and accepts them as their own, opening the possibility to manipulate their consciousness, and, consequently, their behaviour.

In authoritarian countries, individual's own ideas are flavoured with the lack of unbiased information and the ideology imposed by the ruling group. As a result, people's ideas about all kinds of aspects of the society's life – history, politics, economy, even the native language – become distorted and mythologised. Myths in the popular consciousness distort the reality and influence the way the people perceive the world around them.

Belarusians are no exception in that. Living in a non-democratic society with limited access to independent sources of information, they have to shape their opinions under a strong influence of the state ideology, let alone the instability of the government's foreign policy.



Various myths about the EU circulate in Belarus.

A great number of myths arise from the way how the people of one country perceive the peoples of other states, closer and farther away. Their residents are imbued with specific traits, by no means always positive. Their life, seen through a prism of one's country's mass media, personal knowledge and stereotypes, is flavoured by myth-based stories, that often develop into ethnic jokes and anecdotes. I suppose every nation has a collection of such jokes about its neighbours: the English joke about the Irish, Russians – about Ukrainians, and Belarusians – about the Poles.

Myths and stereotypes about the closest neighbours have been formed through the centuries and are quite resistant to change by means of newspapers and television. At the same time, it is quite possible to change the people's attitude to such new structures as the European Union.

It has been not long since Belarusians saw the European Union as something distant, not quite comprehensible, but definitely positive and attractive. Take for example such popular expressions as 'Euro-remodelling' (remodelling done to European standards), 'Euro-standards', 'European quality', and the very words 'Euro' and 'Europeans', after all. However, the situation changed with the enlargement, when Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia joined the EU in 2004. As the European Union and Belarus got a common border, Belarusians felt the need to have a clearer picture of the new neighbour, to understand it and decide who it is – and how to live with it.

That is when the Belarusian government decided that the lands west of Belarus were likely to become an eastern window of the prosperous European Union, and the comparison would not be in favour of their own country. From that time on the Belarusian

ideologists began to present the European Union as a source of instability, cultural decay and ideas which were hostile to the people of Belarus. Many myths about the European Union are rooted right in that ideological policy of the government.

In this small booklet the authors tried to collect the myths about the European Union that are most widespread in Belarus, to show their origins and then to decompose them and show the parts that are concoction and the parts with nuggets of truth which, as you know, exist in every myth.

It is important to get rid of myths because they distort the reality, prevent from finding and seeing the real reasons of the events, and hinder understanding of the facts. Consequently, they hamper effective actions, as well as timely and adequate reactions to developments.

Understanding the real, not mythical, reasons of events, facts and occurrences helps us better comprehend the situation, resist manipulation and make our own valid choices. Be it the choice of goods in a supermarket or the way we want to see the foreign and internal state policies. Again, it is very important to get rid of myths about our neighbours, the people who live across the border. After all, they are the people who we'll have to live, cooperate, and build relations with, and we need to do that with the eyes wide-open and real knowledge about the neighbours.

We hope sincerely that the booklet will be useful for the readers and will help to better understand how the EU works, how its economy is organised, and, finally, what life of ordinary Europeans looks like. Possibly, this understanding will bring the European Union closer to Belarus, and moves Belarus at least one small step nearer the EU.

1. IT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION THAT DRAWS NEW DIVIDING LINES IN EUROPE

The gist of the myth

Despite declarations about openness and freedom of movement, the European Union constantly creates new barriers and makes it more difficult for Belarusians to enter its territory.

The roots of the myth

The idea that the European Union creates barriers in Europe instead of destroying them has begun to appear in Belarusian state mass media since 2002, when Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia started negotiations about joining NATO.

While the EU was far away, the Belarusian ideologists paid little attention to it and held the United States and NATO "up to shame". But in 2004 Belarus got a border with the European Union, and the Belarusian authorities increased the number of anti-European statements. Taking the state monopoly on mass media into account, the tactic proved to be effective literally in a year or two: pro-European moods languished in Belarus, while pro-Russian sentiments grew stronger.

The opinion polls demonstrate this trend.

In 2007 the Belarusians understood how it felt to be the outsiders of the European integration. Poland,


I have to go through so much trouble to get an EU visa.
Its easy to say for you, my friend... You should try to get a Belarusian one.

Distribution of answers to the question: "If a referendum was held now in Belarus on whether Belarus should join the European Union, what would be your choice?", %

Variant of answer	12'02	03'03	09'05	11'06	12'07	09'08	12'08	03'09	09'09	12'09	03'10
Yes	60.9	56.4	38.0	36.6	37.1	26.7	30.1	34.9	44.1	40.7	36.2
No	10.9	11.9	44.0	36.2	35.0	51.9	40.6	36.3	32.8	34.6	37.2

Source: IISEPS (http://www.iiseps.org/03-10-05.html)

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia joined Schengen area, and the Belarusians faced more difficulties in their trips to the neighbouring states. Previously, one just needed to buy a cheap voucher in order to travel to Poland, and could get a Latvian visa free of charge. Now a Schengen visa costs 60 Euro, and means a huge pile of documents and references to be presented at the embassies.

Decomposing the myth

The myth is grounded in real facts: it has really become more difficult to cross the border. The change was especially painful for the residents of the border area, whose life was tied to the possibility of travelling to Poland and Lithuania.

For fairness' sake, the Schengen area existed before 2007 as well, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania just began to apply its regulations. After all, the European Union is entitled to protect its territory and check its visitors. Besides that, the Schengen regulations are incomparable with the restrictions of the Cold War, for instance, and we can't say the border is closed completely.

The leadership of Belarus accuses the European Union of prepossession, but "forgets" about the Belarusian visa regulations for the Europeans, which are not a bit simpler, but rather more complicated (and expensive!) than the Schengen ones. It's worth reminding who is to blame for the fact that Belarusians pay €60 for a Schengen visa, while Russians and Ukrainians – only €35. Because of its leadership's actions, Belarus failed

to become a participant in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). No participation – no cheap visas.

Now, the Belarusian government plays the hypocrite insisting on cheap visas and simplified regulations. With freedom of movement more Belarusians will see the European life standards, which, in its turn, will bring about unwanted comparisons. Possibly, this is the main reason why the calls of the official Minsk to “reduce the price of visas and simplify the procedures” do not advance beyond the calls.

There is no secret what needs to be done to improve the visa situation. First thing, the country needs to join the ENP, i.e. to sign the readmission agreement with the EU. The real steps towards cheap visas would be reducing the price of the Belarusian visas for the Europeans, introduction of biometrical passports, as well as progress in liberalization and democratization of the society.

At present Belarus has an opportunity to move closer to the European Union through participation in the Eastern Partnership programme, which includes six post-Soviet states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). By the way, creation of the visa-free area is one of the programme’s goals. As we see, the barriers are not that insurmountable.

Conclusion

The Belarusian citizens really do have difficulties associated with the eastward expansion of the Schengen area. However, this is not the ill will of the European Union that allegedly builds new barriers, but, to a greater extent, the reluctance of the Belarusian authorities to establish relations of a higher level. Anytime can the Belarusian leadership show good will and make an effort to solve the visa problem.

2. BELARUSIAN GOODS WILL FAIL TO COMPETE ON THE EUROPEAN MARKET

The gist of the myth

Opening the market with the European Union would strike at the Belarusian economy. Firstly, the domestics would not be relevant or meet the competition in Europe, while most enterprises would not be able to afford transition to Euro-standards. Secondly, our market would be flooded with goods from Europe, often cheaper and of better quality, and the Belarusian customers' money would go abroad.

The roots of the myth

On the one hand, the myth is based on the bitter truth: the technical and innovation basis of the Belarusian enterprises is weak. On the other hand, the authorities use the myth in order to persuade the population: Belarus depends on the Russian markets, maximal economic integration of the two countries is needed – in this case economy often works to cover up politics.


My child, why would you need so much cream?
I am going to visit my friends in Austria. They always ask to bring as much Belarusian cream as I can.

Decomposing the myth

It's funny that the myth is being dispelled at the moment by its author – the state. Prices for Russian energy resources have grown, oil products export returns decreased, and the government began to talk about development of new markets, including the European ones. But is it that simple?

On the one hand, the European Union competes with the swiftly expanding economies, like China, and, in order to protect its market, is looking for partners in the neighbouring countries and aims at integration with them.

For instance, the European Union is ready to discuss *deep and comprehensive free trade areas* with the member-countries of the Eastern Partnership, including Belarus. These are the prospects for the longer-term future though. However, some concrete steps to closer economic integration have already been made in different spheres, from agriculture to the common airspace.[1] From 2004 to 2008 the European Union built up the trade volume with the neighbours, and began to buy 91% more.[2]

On the other hand, the member-countries of the Eastern Partnership sign the Paris Declaration, saying that the Eastern Partnership would base on the common European values. That means, one must not separate politics from economy, and democracy from the market. And, in order to trade with the EU more openly, the neighbouring states are to meet a number of concrete conditions.

Economic relations between Belarus and the EU are quite peculiar. They become even more complicated as there is no agreement basis – the EU did not ratify the Agreement about Partnership and Cooperation in 1995, when the Belarusian government abandoned the democratic path of development. As a result, the economic relations are regulated by the Agreement about trade and cooperation, signed by the European Community and the Soviet Union in 1989…

[1] «Five years of European Neighbourhood Policy: more trade, more aid, more people-to-people contacts», IP/10/566, Brussels, 12 May 2010.

[2] «Five years of European Neighbourhood Policy: more trade, more aid, more people-to-people contacts», IP/10/566, Brussels, 12 May 2010.

The quality of the Belarusian goods and their failure to meet the European standards also keep the trade back. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government claimed that the Belarusian enterprises would turn to the world and European standards. By the way, the European colleagues help Belarus to make a transition to higher quality standards.

Meanwhile, the statement that the severity of the European standards is just the measure to protect the EU market is also part of the myth. During BELTA online conference chairman of the State Committee on Standardization Valery Koreshkov was asked: "All these requirements of the EU on CE-Mark, etc. are not to care about customers, but to create barriers for import! We apply one requirement of the EU, and they introduce another one right away".[3]

The official explained that stricter requirements appear because of new methods of testing products, which ascertain, for instance, impact of some substances on human health and environment. In other words, this is not setting up barriers in trade but care about people and nature.

Valery Koreshkov stressed, Belarusian requirements to the majority of products correspond to the international and European norms.

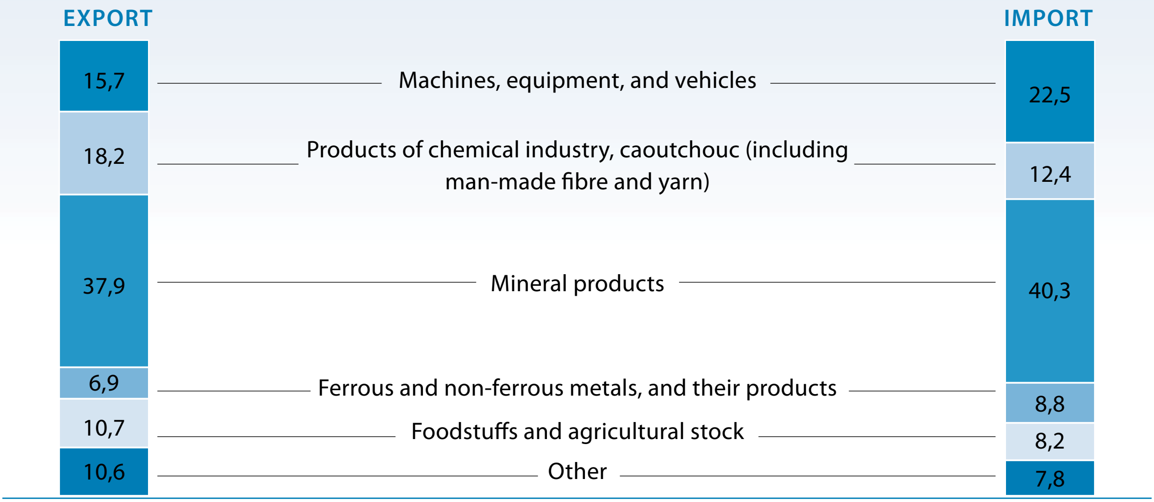
However, one should remember that it is possible to force the enterprises to produce unneeded products, but it is impossible to force the European customer to buy them.

By the way, although the European Union was second in size trade partner of Belarus, the country had a positive trade balance with it. But in the first six months of 2010 Russia had 39.3% of the total export volume, while the EU countries – 29.8%. In comparison with 2009 Belarus lost 13.4% in export to Europe. That was a clear demonstration of how much Belarusian export depends on the oil and oil products supply from Russia. Apart from oil products, Belarus supplies only one billion dollars worth of products to the EU.[4]

[3] BELTA news agency on-line

[4] AllMinsk.BIZ, Collapse of Export to the EU and Clearance from the Oil Grant

Table 1: Structure of foreign trade in Belarus, 2009.



Source: BelStat, http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/indicators/ftrade1.php

Conclusion

The myth will become a reality if status quo prevails. But it will dissipate if Belarus enters the doors held open by the EU. The work should be done simultaneously in all aspects: there should be a political will to use all opportunities of the Eastern Partnership; producers should be given more freedom. The EU is ready to help with economic transformation, but on conditions that the economy would work for the state which respects the rights and freedoms of the people.

3. CLOSER TIES WITH THE EU WILL LEAD TO A RIFT WITH RUSSIA

The gist of the myth

For Belarus, closer ties are possible either with the EU, or with Russia. Economic integration with the EU will lead to a rift with Russia and a collapse of the Union State.

The roots of the myth

The problem of geopolitical choice (i.e. who the country should be friends with) is still relevant. In fact, the society is split. On one hand, the state propaganda for years has been proclaiming the Union State and slandering the West. On the other hand, the right-wing opposition forces insist on Belarus joining the EU and NATO, contrasting the quite real European Union with the attempts to recreate the USSR.

The polls also show the difference of opinions in Belarus. For example, in May 2006, answering the question "If Belarus becomes member of the EU, what kind of consequences that may lead to?" 20% of Belarusians said it would lead to deterioration of the relations with Russia.[5]

According to a BISS study, 44.2% of those who know about the Eastern Partnership program, and 35.2% of those who haven't heard about it, believe that the

[5] Source: IISEPS national poll, May 2006, (http://www.iiseps.org/12-05-06.html)


How could I sit closer to the European without distancing myself too much from my Russian friend?

country's participation in the Eastern Partnership will lead to deterioration of relations with Russia.[6]

In other words, even those following the development of the relations with the EU, but receiving information from the state-controlled mass media, do believe in the myth.

Decomposing the myth

As a matter of fact, the options are not really in discrepancy. Today the case in point is not economic or political integration of Belarus into the EU, but only normalization of relations after more than ten years of isolation. Things getting back to normal do not mean a sharp turn of Belarus to the West. They would just help to establish ordinary neighbourly relations with the EU, just as with Russia or Ukraine.

One of the aims of the Eastern Partnership is economic rapprochement of Belarus and the EU, but it does not conflict with Russia-Belarus relations. Open EU markets do not demand rejection of the agreements between Russia and Belarus.

At present Belarus has close trade, economic and military ties with Russia, and the breach would lead to disastrous consequences for the economy. That is why the government of Belarus will maintain the ties with Russia, even if the country develops better relations with the EU. Moreover, the decision to join the EU would not mean political or economic breach with Russia, and even as a member of the EU, Belarus would be able to trade with Russia and to keep political and cultural relations with it. For instance, Romania's membership in the EU did not hinder Romania-Moldova relations. Admittedly, Belarus would have to leave the Union State and remove Russian military facilities.

By the way, Russia is also interested in keeping close ties with Belarus, especially in the military field. The Russian radar in Belarus is the key element of the Russian missile early warning chain, while the joint regional military grouping of Belarus and Russia is the

[6] Study of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and NOVAK laboratory "Belarus and the world: geopolitical choice and security through the prism of economy and culture", carried out in the first quarter of 2010 (http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/sa_010610_ru_geopolit.pdf)

only combat effective unit to the West of Moscow. Belarus is also important as a political partner. The Union of Russia and Belarus demonstrates that Russia is the centre of integration processes in the post-Soviet area.

All of the above leads to conclusion that rapprochement of Belarus with the EU would not lead to automatic break-up with Russia.

By the way, Russia is also a strategic partner of the European Union, and the level of their cooperation is a lot higher than Belarus has with the EU. That is why improvement of relations between the European Union and Belarus and rapprochement of their economies will help to develop cooperation in the region, and, in the long view, to create the single market of the EU, Belarus, Russia and other post-Soviet states.

Conclusion

Political and economic rapprochement of Belarus with the European Union does not mean a breach of relations with Russia. This country remains the key trade partner and source of energy resources for Belarus. The Belarusian government does not declare joining the EU; that is why there is no need to reject the whole complex of political and economic agreements with Russia. In its turn, Russia is not interested in the breach with Belarus, which it considers an extremely important partner.

4. EURO IS ON THE PATH TO COLLAPSE

The gist of the myth

The global financial crisis, complications in the economies of the Eurozone countries started off the rumours the European currency might collapse. These are the concerns of both the Europeans and the Belarusians, who began to hesitate if they should have their savings in euro.

The roots of the myth

On one hand, the myth about collapse of the euro reflects apprehensions and debates in the European Union. On the other hand, it is supposed to persuade the citizens of Belarus in reliability of the Belarusian ruble. In the middle of 2005 *Sovetskaya Belorussia*, published by the President's Office, wrote that "big money fall with a big bang" supporting it with an expert's opinion that creation of euro was a mistake. In five years the newspaper repeated the pessimistic predictions in the article headed "Euro on Vacation" concluding that "the Eurozone failed as a project promising significant economic advantages to its members".

Decomposing the myth

The Belarusians are often told it is not only the euro that is likely to collapse, but the US dollar too. However, the confidence of the Belarusian depositors in foreign currencies is consistently high.

Besides that, the troubles in the European Union are to strengthen the belief of the Belarusians that the misfortunes of the Belarusian economy happen because of the global financial crisis. According to the opinion polls, 34% of the Belarusians blame the crisis, and 15.8% -- the government of the country for the economic problems.

The Eurozone was created n 1999, with 11 member-countries. In 2010 the single currency is shared by 16 states.

The global financial crisis has become a serious test for the young currency. Analysts doubted if the euro would be able to cope with it. They even discussed the likelihood of some countries leaving the Eurozone.


What should
I choose?..

Table 1. Which currency do you give most credence to?, %

Variant of answer	March'04	September'05	January'07	June'08	December'08	September'09	March'10
US Dollars	50.1	43.5	40.5	26.7	41.2	37.8	43.2
Euro	17.5	16.2	23.3	37.3	19.5	27.9	23.9
Belarusian rubles	28.0	33.7	32.0	28.5	28.8	27.6	26.2
Russian rubles	17.5	16.2	23.3	37.3	19.5	2.5	2.7

Source: IISEPS, March 2010, #3

Table 2: EUR/USD currency movements



Source: European Central Bank

But the problems in the Eurozone are not the evidence of the euro's weakness, but of the insufficient economic and political integration of the Eurozone member-countries. It is not enough to unify the monetary policy, while the fiscal policy continues to be determined by the national governments. The market of labor force and capital should acquire more freedom and mobility.[7]

However, for some countries the Eurozone has become a salvation. The crisis led to swing changes in other currencies, while the countries of the Eurozone did not face the jeopardy. They could take loans to cover budget deficits with lower interest rates. This is why more countries show interest in joining the Eurozone during the crisis; there are discussions about introducing the euro in Great Britain, Denmark and Sweden.[8]

The crisis might develop according to a few different scenarios, the worst of which would be a country's default and leaving the Eurozone.[9] However, in order to leave the Eurozone, it would have to leave the European Union. That is why stability of the euro is the matter of the EU integrity, competitive ability, and its image in the world arena. After all, the Eurozone market is second in size to the US.

Moreover, the eventual collapse of the Eurozone would have a negative impact on all countries, to a different degree. Setback in production might reach 9%, inflation – double-digit numbers, and the returning national currencies might be depreciated by fifty percent.[10] That is why leaving the Eurozone is not a solution. On the contrary, closer ties are needed between the countries.

Conclusion

One should not confuse the global financial crisis, which the Eurozone fought with all possible measures, with the crisis of the euro, which occurred because of the imperfections of the countries' integration and their fiscal policy.

The euro passed the test of the global financial crisis. But it should not rest on its laurels. After all, both the EU members, and their partners would lose if the euro collapsed. However, the Eurozone is not going to fall down in the near future. On the contrary, Estonia joined it on January 1, 2011.

[7] Simon Tilford, *How to Save the Euro*, Centre for European Reform, September 2010.

[8] Simon Tilford, *The Euro at Ten: Is Its Future Secure?*, Centre for European Reform, January 2009.

[9] Simon Tilford, *The Euro at Ten: Is Its Future Secure?*, Centre for European Reform, January 2009.

[10] ING, *EMU Break-up: Quantifying the Unthinkable*, Financial Markets Research, Global Economics, 7 July 2010.

5. THE EUROPEAN UNION IS AN ENTIRE BUREAUCRACY

The gist of the myth

The European Union is an extremely bureaucratised structure; vast sums of tax money are spent to maintain the official machinery; as a result, numerous EU commissions make stupid and absurd decisions. The European Union has a very complicated and ineffective management system.

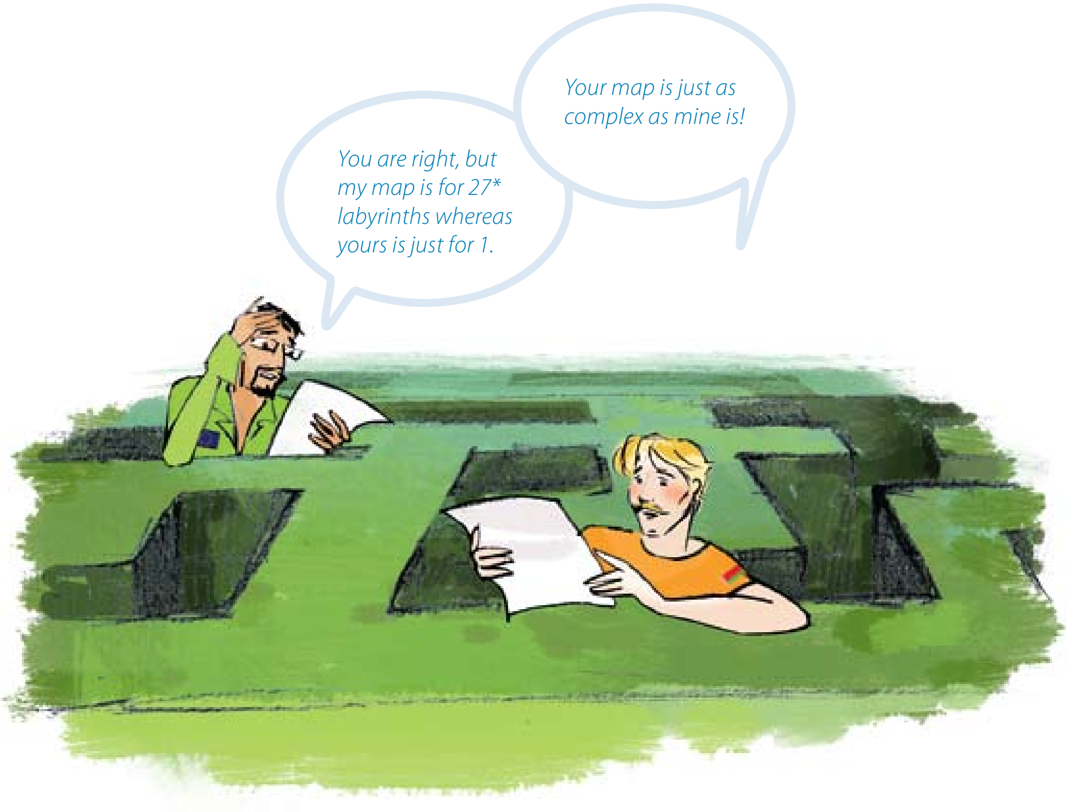
The roots of the myth

The myth can be explained by very little knowledge the Belarusian citizens have about the European Union. BISS studies show, the majority of the Belarusians receive information from the state-run mass media which present the EU not in the best plight and order. Often journalists, who have little knowledge about organization of the EU, write only about negative or curious facts: corruption and other kinds of scandals, failure of ratification of important agreements, introducing funny norms and regulations, such as the directives about standards of sound for personal music players or length of cucumbers.

Decomposing the myth

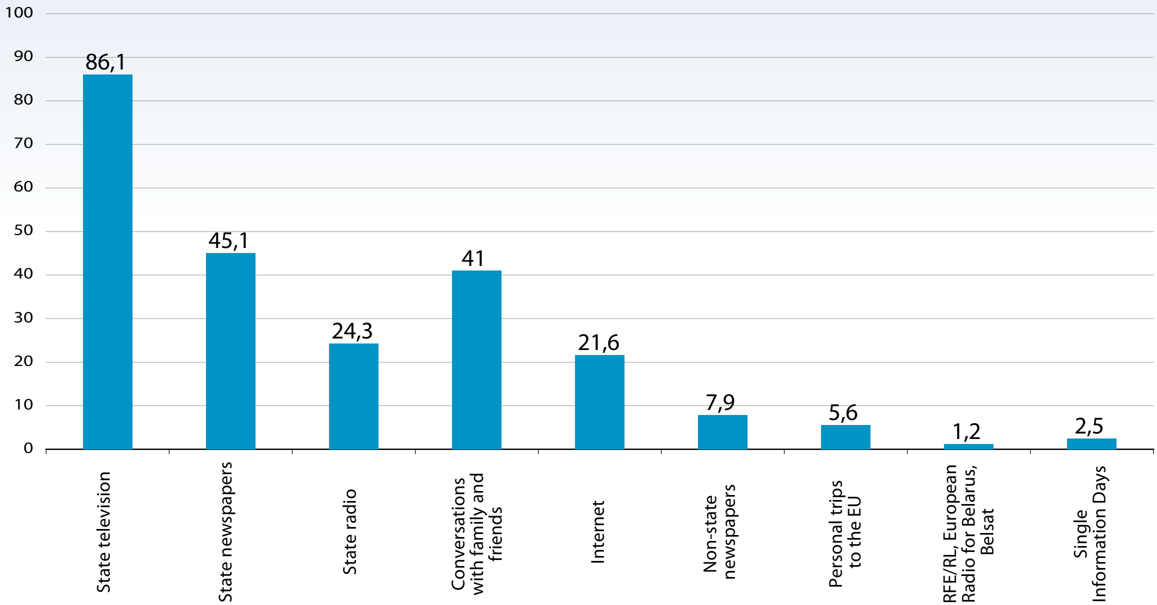
First of all, two absolutely different notions are confused in the myth: bureaucracy (i.e. hired staff of, mainly, executive bodies) and the decision-making system, i.e. the political system of the EU.

In the labyrinths of bureaucracy



*Currently, the EU consists of 27 member states.

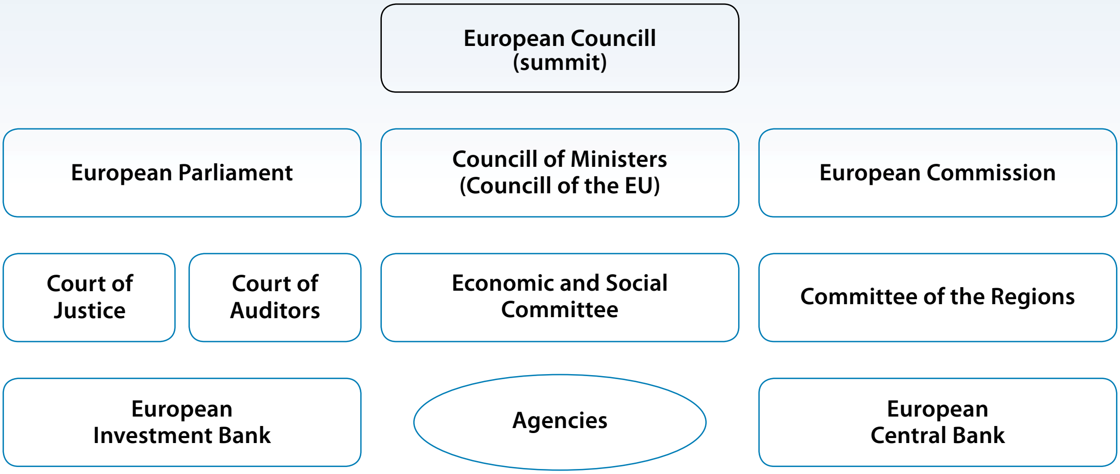
What sources do you get information about the EU from?



The EU decision-making system is complicated indeed. It might be difficult for comprehension for a person who is used to deal with simpler political system of a single state. This is where stereotypes come from. The current political system of the EU is a peculiar compromise between the centre of the European Union and all member states, consisting of the interwoven supranational and intergovernmental institutions. For that reason the EU is often rebuked for being not democratic enough, but otherwise it would be impossible to balance the opinions of all the member states and take the interests of the EU as a whole into account.

The political system of the EU is organised in the way aiming to meet the interests of the maximum number of participants of the political process, from the governments of different member countries to the civil society and self-governance bodies in separate regions. Solutions acceptable for all are found by long negotiations and consultations inside the legislative,

Institutions of the European Union



executive, and advisory bodies of the EU. On the plus side, that helps to avoid tension between them and makes the European system more flexible.

It is natural that the system built on the culture of negotiations and consultations needs more time for decision making. The drawback is compensated by the fact that the governments and parliaments of the EU member countries don't have to wait for Brussels' decisions and can make them on their level (if they do not contradict the EU laws, of course). On the other hand, as practice shows, the decisions that are really important are made fast enough.

It is true, there are quite many civil servants in the EU apparatus: 42, 000-54, 000 people.[11] However, one should take into account that they serve the organization of 27 states with population of over half-billion

[11] http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=75994

people! For comparison: there are over 1.5 million officials in Russia, while in the US there ate 2.7 million federal employees.

One more interesting fact: according to the Belarusian Ministry of Statistics, the total number of civil servants in Belarus was 52, 700 in 2003. The number has grown since. With these numbers at hand, talking about huge bureaucracy in the EU is not really appropriate.

Conclusion

The decision-making system of the European Union is multi-level and complicated. However, it is essential for finding balance between the goals and objectives of the EU member countries, the EU itself, and the separate interest groups. In return, the system resolves many potential contradictions at an early stage and helps to avoid tension inside the EU later on.

The European bureaucracy, as it proved, is not that impressive, especially, if one considers the fact that the number of civil servants in one country of Belarus is comparable to the number of officials in the European Union.

6. CITIZENS DO NOT FEEL SOCIALLY SECURE IN THE CAPITALIST COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The gist of the myth

In the European Union, despite the developed economy and high incomes, people are not socially secure, the state does not care about them, and they often have to go out to the streets and make trouble in defense of their rights.

The roots of the myth

European workers' protests have become the favourite picture on the Belarusian TV. It is supposed to convey the message that life standards in Europe decrease, building up social tensions. It is especially hard for the new countries of the European Union: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Upon joining the EU, the prices and utility bills grew, while salaries and pensions remained low, social needs expenditures were cut down, and unemployment remained high… Besides that, this picture serves as a good background for reports about growth in prosperity and the beauty of the social model of the Belarusian state.


No, not again… We have to spend our holidays in Italy again due to those minimal pensions of ours.

Table 2. Growth dynamics of average monthly salary (before taxes) in the EU countries and Belarus (in Euro)

Year/Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
EU – 27[12] countries	n/a	2328,9	2511,7	2528,9	2352,2	2426,2	2608,5	n/a	n/a	n/a
EU – 15 countries (before 2004 expansion)	2574,1	2647,4	2724,1	2744,1	2877,7	2957,1	3010,3	n/a	n/a	n/a
Latvia[13]	n/a	283,9	288,8	290,9	317,1	353,8	429,6	566,1	681,3	655,8
Lithuania[14]	281,7	277	293,4	310,6	332,9	369,6	433,2	522	623,1	595,5
Estonia[15]	n/a	n/a	n/a	407,3	443,1	501,8	582,1	704,8	805,6	770,6
Poland[16]	479,8	569,2	536	467	543,2	610,3	649,1	742	783,5	748,9
Belarus[17]	60,9	89,8	100,1	98,1	120,5	183,1	206,3	218,6	312,3	234,8

[12] Eurostat Database, *Average gross annual earnings in industry and services, by gender – [tps00175]* (accessed on 28.10.2010).

[13] Latvian Statistics, *DS02. Average monthly wages and salaries by kind of activity (in lats)*. Available online: http://data.csb.gov.lv/Dialog/Saveshow.asp (accessed on 28.10.2010).

[14] Statistics Lithuania, *M3060801: Average monthly earnings by sector.* Available online: http://db1.stat.gov.lt/statbank/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?Maintable=M3060801&PLanguage=1 (accessed on 28.10.2010).

[15] Statistics Estonia, *YIM005: average monthly gross income per employee and recipients of gross income by region/administrative unit, sex and age group – euro* (accessed on 28.10.2010).

[16] GUS – Central Statistical Office, *Average monthly gross wage and salary in national economy (1950-2009)*. Available online: http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_1630_ENG_HTML.htm (accessed on 28.10.2010).

[17] Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь. Годовые данные. Заработная плата. Режим доступа: http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/indicators/wages.php (доступен 28.10.2010).

Decomposing the myth

The state-run mass media for years have been trying to convince the Belarusians that integration with the European Union would lead to the loss of social benefits. The propaganda turned out to be quite effective: in the end of 2002 over 60% of the Belarusian citizens wanted their country to join the EU, while in 2006 their number was twice as small.[18]

Let's compare the key figures of the population's welfare and social security in the countries of the EU and in Belarus.

During the last decade income of population grows in Poland, in the Baltic countries, and in Belarus too.

[18] IISEPS

However, the minimal wage in Belarus reached only 400, 000 BYR (95.8 Euro) by December 2010. This is the Latvian minimal wage ten years ago. Minimal pay in the new EU countries is now 2.5-4 times more than in Belarus. The same goes for pensions: they are 2-4 times bigger in the "new" EU countries than in Belarus.

The statement that unemployment rates grew in the new EU countries does not have any substantiation. On the contrary, the number of the unemployed reduced by 50 percent due to the economic growth, and the tendency was interrupted only with the economic crisis.

Officially, the unemployment rate in Belarus is about 1%. However, the majority of the unemployed in Belarus do not register at job centres in order to avoid the community work. All the more, in 2010 the dole was 50.4 BYR (12 Euro), making up 18.4% of the minimal subsistence level.[19] For example, in Poland the unemployment dole is 186 Euro, exceeding the minimal subsistence level by 1.5 times.[20]

Certainly, Belarus is behind the EU not at every aspect. For example, only Estonian women have a 3-year long child- care leave, while the lump-sum baby allowance is significantly higher only in Latvia. However, the prenatal allowance in Belarus is 4 times less than in Estonia. In average, it is €702 (for 126 days). Meanwhile, in Germany it is €7, 050 (for 98 days).

Finally, the rights of workers in the EU are protected stronger than in Belarus. The best defenders are the strong independent trade unions. That is the reason for so many strikes – the European workers demand better working conditions and are not afraid to be fired for criticism. While in Belarus 90% of workers have fixed term contracts, in the EU the majority signs termless labour agreements.

Conclusion

The level of social protection of the population even in the new countries of the European Union is not lower, and in many aspects – higher, than in Belarus. Poland's, Lithuania's, Latvia's, and Estonia's entry to the EU contributed to income growth of the population.

Acceptance of the EU norms and free trade with the European Union do not endanger the social guarantees of the Belarusian citizens. They can rather suffer from the deterioration of the economic situation in the country and painful reforms. However, the experience of the neighbour countries can help Belarus upgrade its economy and, at the least, keep the social guarantees on the present level.

[19] Kanstantsin Skuratovich. Belstat Counts Us This Way. "Belorusy I Rynok", #35 (921), 20-26 September 2010, http://www.belmarket.by/ru/93/80/7292/# (accessed 28.10.2010).

[20] Wyższy zasiłek dla bezrobotnych – waloryzacja zasiłku o 3,5%, Portal internetowy Prawo Pracy. Available online: http://www.prawo-pracy.pl/wyzszy_zasilek_dla_bezrobotnych___waloryzacja_zasilku_o_3_5_-aktualnosci-751.html (acessed on 28.10.2010).

7. IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, BRUSSELS ORDERS THE MEMBER STATES ABOUT

The gist of the myth

The member states of the European Union have lost their state sovereignty. They have to ask Brussels for permission for conducting their policies.

The roots of the myth

The myth originates from intensification of the anti-European propaganda with the expansion of the EU in 2004. The Belarusian president in his speeches and analytical programs of the Belarusian TV stressed the subordinate role of the EU member states, their loss of sovereignty and independence in decision-making.

For instance, in 2008, addressing the BSU students Alexander Lukashenka said: "At present even on the smallest issues of foreign policy and economy out neighbours are more and more compelled to look back at the central bodies of the EU".[21]

The myth about the loss of sovereignty due to joining the EU is also registered by opinion polls. According to the study in 2010, 20% of supporters and 49.4% of

[21] Speech of the President of Belarus A. Lukashenka at a meeting with BSU students, 12.02.2008 (http://president.gov.by/press55946.html)


What could you say about the Brussels dictate?
Is this some kind of vegetable? I love Brussels sprout. Have not yet tried Brussels dictate, however.

opponents of euro-integration fear loss of national individuality of Belarus, while 25.5% and 66.5%, correspondingly, fear loss of independence.[22]

Decomposing the myth

There is a nugget of truth in the statement about subordination of the EU member states to Brussels. The European Union is a union of states that is governed by supranational bodies, and it is reasonable that the countries delegate some powers to them. It's quite another matter that the power of Brussels is grossly exaggerated by the Belarusian propaganda.

Responsibilities of Brussels and of the national governments are described in the documents of the European Union. For instance, the EU decisions are binding in such spheres as customs union and the single internal market policies, economic and monetary union policies; economic and monetary policy; and agriculture. The states develop their own policies and pass their own laws in all other spheres.

Besides that, the EU members are to coordinate their foreign and security policies. However, the EU decisions in these spheres are not mandatory, and the member states can develop their own foreign policy. For example, when some EU countries supported the US invasion of Iraq, while some others strongly opposed it, that did not contradict the laws of the European Union.

Besides that, the EU is a voluntary union, and the states are free to leave it at any time they want. So far there have been no attempts to do that, i.e. one can conclude that the "Brussels' dictate" is not too onerous.

[22] Study of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and NOVAK laboratory "Belarus and the world: geopolitical choice and security through the prism of economy and culture", carried out in the first quarter of 2010 (http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/sa_010610_ru_geopolit.pdf)

Another important detail should be pointed out. Smaller states of the European Union, for instance, Luxemburg or Malta, have equal powers with the larger states such as Germany or France. Besides that, they hold the EU presidency by rotation and can block a decision sponsored by the influential states.

Regarding the “loss of sovereignty”, one should be aware that in the modern world, with universal interdependency, sovereignty is no longer an absolute value as it used to be in the 19th or early 20th century. An absolute sovereignty is simply not possible now: all countries are part of the global market and global media space, and are linked by cooperation on security issues. That is why delegation of the part of sovereignty to an integration centre might be better for development of a country that keeping it closed and isolated. The European Union demonstrates the efficiency of this model.

Conclusion

Member states of the European Union have really delegated part of their sovereignty to supranational institutions. However, the most important state functions of public administration, such as foreign policy and defense, remain under control of the national governments and parliaments.

The legislation draws a clear line between responsibilities of the European Union and its member states, making it impossible for Brussels to abuse its power. At the sane time, all member countries without exception take part in decision-making on the EU level.

8. THE EUROPEAN UNION IS IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CRISIS

The gist of the myth

The EU is in a systemic crisis. Cultural decline, moral decadence, and growing political and economic contradictions inside the European Union will eventually lead to a collapse not only of the Eurozone, but of the EU itself.

The roots of the myth

The myth was born in the late 1990's, but was especially cultivated during the last years when the European Union began to constitute an ideological menace, showing a vivid alternative to the Belarusian reality. The state TV channels began broadcasting programs that showed the dark side of life in the EU: dispersed rallies, gay parades (as a sign of moral and cultural decadence), strikes and protests of workers…

President's Office' newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* fed its readers with terrifying pictures of Europe's present and future:

"The European Union is bursting at the fresh seams. At bottom of fact, failure of the Euro-constitution is just the tip of the iceberg".[23]

[23] "Sovetskaya Belorussiya" (http://www.sb.by/post/44090/)


Dear Volfgang Amadeus, the rumours have been circulating that we are amidst a deep cultural crisis.

"Now, when the European economy is doing bad, it has begun ruining states instead of bringing the peoples together. One after another, regions start "divorce" procedures against their states.[24]

One of the tricks is comparing the EU to the USSR, where all decisions were made in Moscow (Brussels, in case of the EU), with one nation dominating over the others (in the EU -- Germany and France), and one prevailing ideology (democracy and market economy in the EU). The Belarusians are familiar with the notion of the coming collapse: they saw the Soviet Union tumbling to ruins, although several years earlier it seemed imperishable. Let alone the EU!

Decomposing the myth

The myth about the coming collapse of the European Union has little in common with reality. First of all, the European Union is a voluntary union. Its durability is both in the common historical path and cultural traditions, and in the common values of democracy, human rights and market economy. All that only strengthens the European Union and helps the system self-regulate.

We can give an example of elections in Austria in 2000, when radical political forces won the election. Who knows what kind of path Austria would take if the EU did not introduce the administrative sanctions which had steered the country back to democracy.

Decisions in the EU are made after long discussion, by means of compromise among all the interested parties, preventing tensions and conflicts.

The Lisbon Treaty has a clause about voluntary withdrawal from the EU. However, no state has plans to use it. The European Union remains attractive for both its member states and the countries that declare the plans to join it (Croatia, Macedonia, Turkey, etc).

[24] "Sovetskaya Belorussiya", 17.07.2010 (http://www.sb.by/post/102790/)

That said, membership in the EU provides obvious economic benefits. Member states receive financial aid from the EU funds to conduct reforms and adapt national economies to the common market. Absence of customs barriers inside the EU and a market of half-billion people open new opportunities for commerce.

The statement about the decadence of culture does not stand up to criticism either. The European Union funds and supports an enormous number of cultural projects and creates conditions for development of national cultures. Unlike the USSR with its policy of russification, the European Union supports the development of national languages.

In order to make certain that the EU has no problems with the development of art and culture, it's enough just to come to any European capital and see first-hand the number of cultural events the Belarusians can only dream about. A simple example: while in Belarus there are 14 museums per 1 million people, in the Netherlands there are 35 museums, in Sweden -- 34, in Czech Republic – 33, and in Germany – 32.

Conclusion

Despite certain difficulties, the European Union remains an attractive union, which is able to secure political and economic stability and prosperity to its members. The entry of the Lisbon Treaty into force united the EU even more and increased its role in the world politics.

Statements about the decadence of the European culture are also far from reality and are nothing more than a myth created by the official Belarusian propaganda.

9. NO ONE WAITS FOR BELARUS IN EUROPE

The gist of the myth

The 27 countries have enough of their own problems, and they care not about Belarus. In fact, the Europeans have little idea about their neighbour. Belarusians and Europeans are too different – in culture, language, and mentality.

The roots of the myth

The myth is often used to stress the ties between Belarus and Russia, that Belarusians are closer rather to Russians than Europeans.

At the same time, there are not much, but more supporters of Euro-integration in Belarus than those who want a union with Russia. Thus, the myth that no one waits for Belarusians in Europe serves as a drag on European aspirations and justification of the state policies that keep Belarus behind the common European processes.

Decomposing the myth

In his interview to EuroNews channel Alexander Lukashenka asked a rhetorical question: "Now then, do they wait for us in Europe?.. Belarus is the centre, the heart of Europe. I understand all that. But Europe does not wait for us. Europe has so many problems with these 27 states that they care not about Belarus, Ukraine or others".[25]

[25] http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/president/Stenogramma-intervju-Prezidenta-Respubliki-Belarus-AGLukashenko-telekanalu-Evronjus_i_516058.html


We need more players.
Would you join us?

Distribution of answers to the question: «If you had to choose between uniting with Russia or joining the EU, what would You choose?", %

Variant of answer	09'03	06'04	12'05	06'06	12'07	09'08	03'09	09'09	12'09	03'10
Joining the European Union	36.1	37.6	24.8	29.3	33.3	26.2	35.1	42.7	42.3	40.4
Uniting with Russia	47.6	47.7	51.6	56.5	47.5	54.0	42.4	38.3	42.1	41.4

Source: IISEPS

In fact, there is some controversy in the EU as to whether it can expand further on, and discussions about integration inside the EU. Any European democratic country can apply for membership and comply with a number of strict conditions. However, absorption of a new member to the European family will also depend on the EU enlargement capacity in the future.

Nevertheless, Belarus is a potential member of the European Union. There is no doubt about the geographic position of the country, but there is still a long way to go in the political sphere. And, obviously, it should be the will of the Belarusian citizens.

According to the opinion poll, carried out in September 2010, at a referendum on joining the European Union 42.2% of the Belarusian citizens would say "yes", 32.5% – "no", and a quarter of the respondents were undecided.

If they had to choose between Russia and the EU, 41.7% would choose Europe, and 34.9% would prefer Russia.

The myth is partially based on conviction that the Europeans don't even know such a country – Belarus. Is that really the case? The European Commission published reports "The European Union and Its Neighbours" in 2006 and 2007.[26] In 2006 half of the respondents mentioned Belarus answering the question "what of the following countries do you consider neighbours?" (Ukraine got the highest percentage – 58, Russia was mentioned by 57%).

[26] European Commission, «The European Union and Its Neighbours», Special Eurobarometer 259, October 2006.

In 2007 every twentieth of the interviewed EU residents thought Belarus was the pre-accession country.[27]

Some think that high cost of the Schengen visa is grounded on the unwillingness to see Belarusians in the EU. However, visa liberalization is a proposal of the European Union in response to democratic reforms, and the solution of the problem depends on the Belarusian government.

On the part of the EU, visa situation does not mean bad attitude towards ordinary Belarusians. There are campaigns for reducing visa costs for Belarusian citizens in the European Union, Brussels' officials, politicians and ordinary Europeans support the idea.

With all restrictions, in 2009 Belarus was 1st among the CIS countries on the number of received Schengen visas per head: 449 thousand Belarusians had an opportunity to enter the EU.[28]

The leading European politicians stress that Belarus is a European country and some even go as far as saying that it will be able to join the EU. Ordinary Europeans will support this decision: 72% of the interviewed residents of the EU support its further expansion.

Conclusion

The controversial statement that no one waits for Belarus in Europe does not justify deviation from the European, civilised course of development, from the path to democracy and respect of human rights and freedoms, and market reforms.

There are countries that are fated never to become members of the EU because of their geographic position, but, nevertheless, they aspire to meet the European norms. Belarus has a lot more prospects, and it will always be welcome in the European home – if it makes a real step forwards and proves its dedication to the common European values.

[27] European Commission, "The EU's Relations with its Neighbours: A Survey of Attitudes in the European Union", Special Eurobarometer 285, September 2007.

[28] Visa http://generation.by/news3913.html

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